My Fair Lady 1964
director: George Cukor

2 Storyboards in Preproduction

"If George Cukor wanted me to do sketches and work with the cameraman on getting the shots set up, he would do it. On *My Fair Lady* that's the way he had me working with him. That's just the relationship between the director and his production designer. It was ideal. Cukor was a big enough person so that he never felt it was taking anything away from him. His attitude was 'If I can hire him, I can fire him. And if I can fire him I don't worry about him.' "

Gene Allen
production designer: *My Fair Lady*

Storyboards in Preproduction

2

What is a storyboard? The answer may seem self-evident, but the reality is more complex and interesting than just simple, framed drawings. This chapter will cover the definition of storyboards and how they are used in different preproduction processes. Following the journalist's guideline of covering "the five W's" of a story, the information is broken down into **what, why, who, when**, and **where**. These short essays deal with the physical properties of the storyboard — who develops it and who gets to see it down the line, how to prioritize the script in terms of which scenes require boarding first, and when the process usually takes place within the schedule of production.

What kinds of storyboards are used in the various entertainment industries? There is more than one kind of storyboard, and each one has its own style as well as different types of content. This section covers the general attributes of these documents as well as the varied uses they have in filmmaking, television production, commercials, and interactive media.

Why do we use storyboards in preproduction? The dividing line between preproduction and production is the beginning of principal photography. Before the crew and cast are present, making visual decisions can be done in a quieter, more contemplative environment. Once the "troops" arrive, the decision-making can turn more logistic than aesthetic. The "why" of storyboarding concerns itself with both of these factors.

Who creates the storyboard and its related documents? This part of the chapter deals with which crew members are included in the process of creating the visual script as well as who receives the board if the director chooses to circulate it to the crew.

Where and **when** is the storyboard created? This section covers the use of locations, set designs, and scheduling when working on preproduction visualization. The chapter will also include an outline for the storyboard conference — usually a meeting between the director and an illustrator or art director — and how to best use the time to visualize the film frame.

The preproduction process is as varied as the people who work within it. Take this information as it is intended — as a general map of the preproduction process, which changes with each shift of perspective.

FYI: A word on order

You may notice that this list of W's does not follow the proscribed order of **who, what, where, when, why.** That is because in production, you really need to understand What the process is before you determine Who is going to be a part of it and When it is going to happen.

what

why

who

when

where

The Greatest Show on Earth 1952
director: Cecil B. DeMille
drawing: John Jensen

"*The Greatest Show on Earth* didn't have a script or anything at the time I met DeMille. But he liked to see visualizations of things. He said, 'I want you to go and travel with the circus and sketch everything you think looks interesting.' So I traveled with the circus and lived with them on the circus train. I stayed with them a couple of months. And later on, after I'd been sketching up these scenes a while, he'd have the writers write the story around these sketches."

John Jensen
illustrator: *The Greatest Show on Earth*

What is a Storyboard?

The use of the storyboard, as well as the shot list and overhead diagram, is widespread in many fields of the entertainment industry. Commercials, industrial films, CD-ROMs, and Web sites all use some form of storyboarding to help plan out the relationship of images to other aspects of the project.

Different media and the various artists and technicians who work in them have different needs and use different types of boards. The following pages will plot out basic styles and the uses that storyboards have within the various industries.

Storyboards can be referred to as:

- **Editorial Storyboards**
- **Key Frames**
- **Production Illustrations**
- **Commercial Boards**

"In silent films we didn't have all the words to explain everything, we thought in terms of symbols, graphic arrangements, or possibilities. We were trained in these terms. When you had to explain something you didn't think, 'What's the exact word for this? The exact phrase or sentence?' You just thought, 'What's the picture, the symbol?' "

King Vidor, *Directing the Film*
director: *The Crowd, Our Daily Bread*

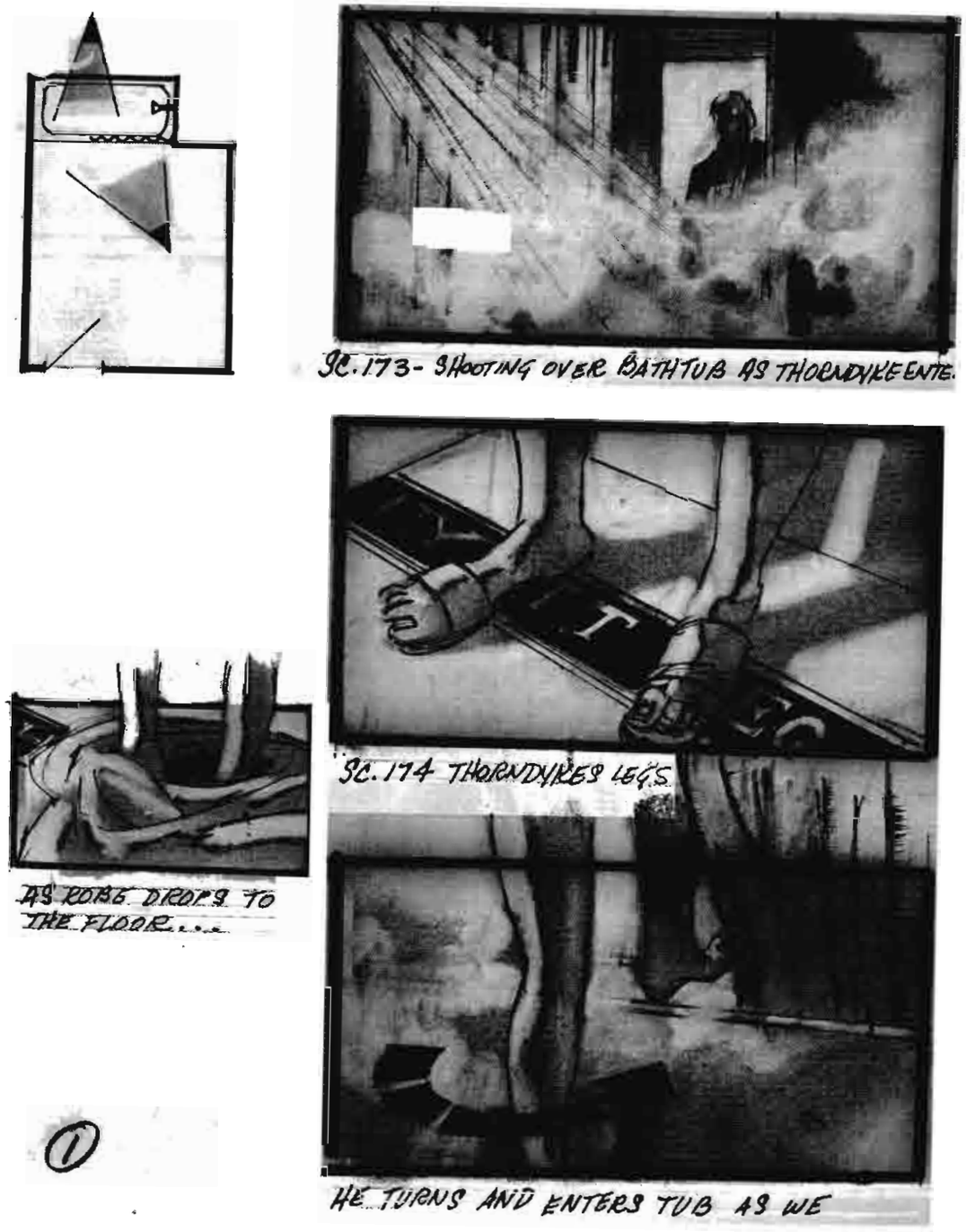
Editorial Storyboarding

- **Plots out the editorial sequencing (how the shots will be edited, not the order of shooting)**
- **Reflects the creative concepts of the Director**
- **8 1/2" by 11" format, usually for one to four frames per page**
- **Black and White**
- **Quick Sketch**

There are a few types of storyboards, but we will only cover one of these in detail in this book. The film and television industries use the Editorial method to give visual expression to the flow of edited sequences from the screenplay. These images are most often characterized by quick black-and-white sketches and can be simple line drawings or complex renderings of light and shadow.

The editorial storyboard is a Xerox art form in the sense that in most cases, the crew rarely works off the original storyboards. Instead, Xeroxes are made of the originals and then distributed to the crew. The storyboards need to be high-contrast so they will reproduce well, so black-and-white storyboards are standard. In special circumstances, a Saturday matinee-type movie such as *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark* will be rendered in color. High-style productions can benefit from adding color in the early stages of preproduction visualization, and obviously, movies with that kind of budget can afford the luxury of this more time-demanding process. What's more, the color drawings are then also available for any book that may be published on the making of the film, or as a special feature when the movie is released on DVD.

Storyboards come in a variety of formats. Most productions make do with black-and-white sketches that focus on camera angle and composition. The drawings are often rendered on an 8 1/2" by 11" page that is easily integrated into the script. Some directors feel that working with only one image per page gives them the freedom to manipulate individual storyboard frames into alternate sequences. Other filmmakers ask for little more than thumbnail drawings, small renditions of frames that can have up to a dozen or more stacked onto a page. The size of these frames is solely up to the director's discretion.



High Anxiety 1977
director: Mel Brooks
drawing: Harold Michelson

The Key Frame

- **More highly rendered than an editorial board**
- **Only shows highlight images from the sequence**
- **Often used as a sales tool**
- **Generally, one image per page on an 8 1/2" by 11" paper**

There are times when a full editorial treatment is unwanted or unnecessary. In that case, key frames might be an appropriate substitution. Key frames pick out important moments in the story and elaborately render them, using a highly developed level of light and shadow. These frames are sometimes utilized when a producer or director is still attempting to raise money for a specific production. These drawings can act as sales tools to give the investors or studios a simple visualization of some of the proposed project's most prominent scenes. It is important to note that these drawings often fall short of being full-scale production illustrations (see below). They are meant to suggest a mood and style rather than communicate steadfast decisions. In fact, there can be a danger in showing up to a pitch meeting with too much polish on the material.

"I worked on *The Towering Inferno* as a conceptual artist and storyboarder. I boarded shots for four different camera crews. They had the stars working every day and they also had a miniature unit and a helicopter unit, and everyone had to know what everyone else was doing. The action stuff was dictated by the special effects angles chosen by the director on the miniatures. I would run back and forth between the crews and Irwin Allen, the director, says, 'Just stay ahead of me Joe, just stay ahead.' "

Joseph Musso
illustrator: *The Towering Inferno, Torn Curtain, Volcano*

Volcano 1997
director: Mick Jackson
drawings: Joseph Musso

Production Illustration

- **Used to fully render lighting**
- **Highly detailed and polished**
- **Always a wide shot of the set**
- **Reflects the creative concepts of the Production Designer**
- **Used as a tool for the designer to sell set design ideas to the director and producer**
- **Large scale, perhaps 14" by 20" or more, one image per paper**

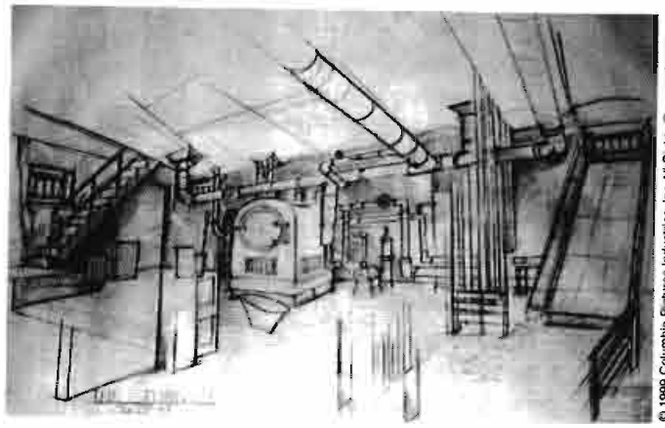
The production illustration is a polished and highly detailed, fully realized image that depicts the setting either at a dramatic moment or without characters, as the set might be seen in an establishing shot.

There are vast sums of money devoted to the design of the settings for each production. Unless you are going to shoot at primarily existing locations, each set needs to be designed and then signed off on by the director and some combination of producers. Often, a model is built for each set. The model can either be a white version that shows only the basic structures or a fully painted maquette that features color, texture, and furnishings. Either way, the model focuses on space.

In addition to this model, many designers use production illustrations that show the set from a wide-angle view that might or might not be part of the actual shot continuity. The purpose of this drawing is twofold: One is to give a sense, in two-dimensions, of the appearance of the set. The other is to give the designer an opportunity to express his or her ideas on how the set might be lit.

"I also sketch most of the sets, production illustrations with quick shadows. The drawings can get expressionistic, but I try and be good, to stay with reality. I start with something quick, to get across an idea, then we focus in and I redraw and get more specific. On the major sets we also did models."

Richard Hoover
production designer: *Girl, Interrupted*



Girl, Interrupted 1999
director: James Mangold
drawing: Richard Hoover

Commercial Storyboards (Also called Comps)

- **Highly rendered color images of the commercial spot**
- **Reflects the creative concepts of the Advertising Agency**
- **Used as a sales tool to present ideas to the client**
- **No camera moves shown**
- **Standard frame up to 6" by 8," mounted on a board in sequence**

The commercial world bears little resemblance to feature films or broadcast television as far as the use of storyboards in the initial stages of preproduction. Commercials are usually envisioned by advertising agencies, not the people who will eventually direct them. Therefore, the first storyboard is a sales tool that is commissioned by the client (i.e., a car manufacturer) and then drawn up by the agency to show their ideas on the proposed spot. Once approved, this board is then used to get directors and production companies to bid on the commercial. Once the job has been awarded, the director then has the option to create his or her own shooting boards for the spot that follow the agency's editorial storyboard structure.

Flying Bros
drawing: John Dahlstrom

Materials Used for the Editorial Storyboard

Artists use a wide variety of materials when creating an editorial storyboard, ranging from a simple pencil to a state-of-the-art computer system. Most artists still employ the classic techniques of a light, rough under-sketch and then a polish level of black lines and gray-tone shadows. The materials used can include non-photo blue pencils for the under-drawing, and graphite pencils ranging from the soft, 4B variety to harder ones up to 2H for the bulk of sketching. Also, colored pencils that have a waxy content (like Prismacolor or Verithin brands) produce good, dark lines for the over-drawing details. Some artists love to add shadows with a cotton swab dipped in powdered graphite. It quickly covers large areas of the drawing, and then light can be added in by dragging an eraser over the gray-tone areas. Some artists sketch with pencil and then detail the drawing with a variety of pens and markers. These materials are less forgiving, as it is more difficult to erase or lighten-up an area that has gone too dark.

Other materials that have been used in older examples of storyboards include colored pastels, gouache, watercolor, and charcoal. These materials are very beautiful in their many applications, and if you have the time, they will reward your investigations. But beware the surface — charcoal and pastel will spread and smear, so you will need to protect your originals with a fixative and/or cover sheet.

One technique I have enjoyed starts off with sketching a simple sketch with a graphite pencil on white bond paper. I make all my overall decisions on composition and framing in this first step. Then I will make a couple of copies of the drawing onto a heavier paper and use those versions to play around with light, shadow, and maybe color, if the situation calls for it. The final version is then re-Xeroxed and handed out to the appropriate crew members. This technique is time-consuming and usually used with the type of board discussed below.

Materials Used in Key Frame Sketches

Because of their use as sales tools, key frames are often rendered in color. Artists use a great variety of media for color sketches, including, but not limited to: colored pencil, pastel, watercolor, markers, pen, and charcoal. Because the key frame deals with individual setups instead of sequences, it is often rendered one to a page in the 8 1/2" by 11" format, or larger, if desired by the director or the producer.

Choosing your Materials

A description of the materials commonly used in the development of each type of board previously described is listed below. This list is only meant as a guide to your creativity. There is no correct single way to render these images. In the end, the choice of material is one that is ruled by the senses, not the intellect. Paper has a particular feel to it: smooth, rough, reflective, matte. Pencils offer a great number of qualities: hard or soft, waxy or chalky. These choices come down to personal preferences. Spend a while in an art supply store and test drive some of the materials. If you are just beginning to collect some supplies, buy a variety of pencils and see which of them responds best to your touch. Experiment. Enjoy.

The lists are by no means comprehensive, as every artist, director, or designer experiments and finds a technique that is most comfortable for her or him. This is just a general guide for those readers who may need to visit an art supply store before starting on a new project.

EDITORIAL STORYBOARDS
8.5" by 11" paper
non-photo blue pencil
graphite pencils, HB, 2B
Black pens (try Penstix, in a variety of widths: F, EF, EEF)
Prismacolor pencil: Black
Verithin pencil: Indigo
Sharpener
Kneaded eraser
Triangle: 90 degree with a hypotenuse of at least 12"

PRODUCTION ILLUSTRATIONS
Full sheets of paper 20" by 30" or illustration board
A set of gouache paints, brushes
Set of colored pencils
Graphite pencils
Toned markers
Variety of black pens

COMMERCIAL COMPS
Marker paper, 11" by 14"
Full sets of color and gray tone markers
Non-photo blue pencil
Graphite pencils
Variety of black pens
Black board for mounting

KEY FRAMES
8.5" by 11" paper, or larger
As these can be color or B&W, follow the lists for editorial boards or production illustration

Materials Used in Production Illustration

Designers use a wide variety of media for this kind of sketch, including pencil, pen, pastel, charcoal, and gouache. The size of the illustrations can vary, but they are usually much larger than a typical storyboard frame — up to 20" by 30". They are typically rendered on a good sheet of illustration board or pastel paper.

Materials Used in Commercial Boards

Commercial boards are almost always full-color renderings. They are formatted using the television aspect ratio of 1:1.33 and are most often drawn with a set of toned markers. The boards only show composition, not camera movement. Also, the voiceover and dialogue track are inserted in a box below the image. These are highly polished images, down to the glint of light on a car's fender. They are, above all, about selling visual ideas to a client.

An Overview

How do these four applications of preproduction visualization relate to each other?

- The **editorial board** plans out all the shots in a film to tell the story, scene by scene. The shots are then arranged in editorial sequence so that the director and the crew can refer to them during filming.

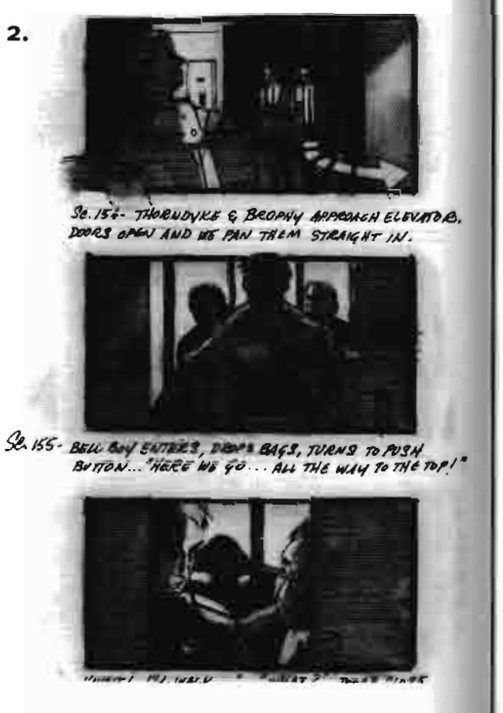
- The **key frames** only show a selection of shots, perhaps only crucial sequences or the most complex camera moves, or the establishing shot at the beginning of the scene.

- The **production illustration** isn't really a storyboard in that it focuses on showing a set rather than a shot. It is generally created by the production designer rather than the director.

- The **commercial board** is a sales tool typically used by an advertising agency to present a concept to a client. It is often created before the director is even hired for the spot.

1.

2.



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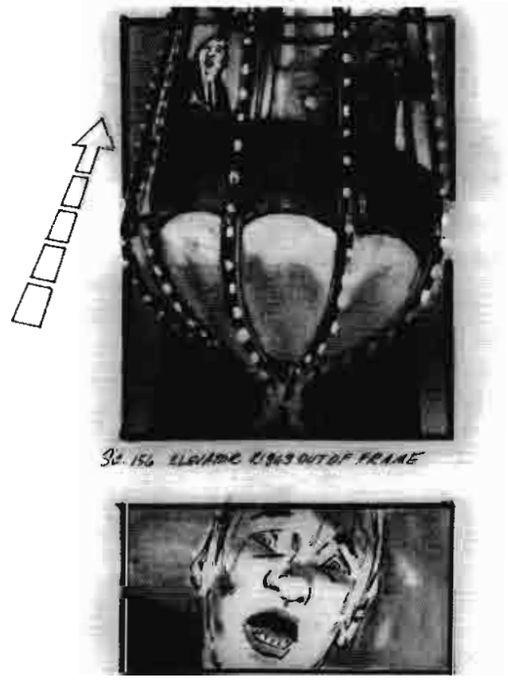

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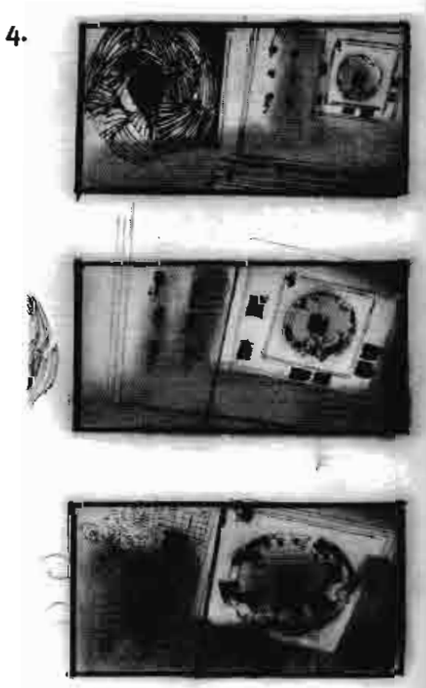


High Anxiety 1977
director: Mel Brooks
drawings: Harold Michelson

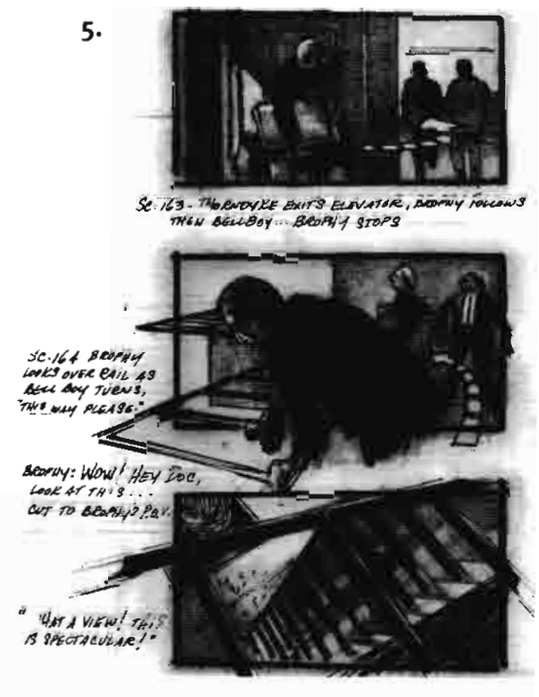
Case Study

High Anxiety

"I sat down with Hitchcock a few times when I had done a sequence that I thought was terrific. He looked at it and he said, 'This is really terrific, but I can't use it here.' And I thought, he's jealous. You know what I mean? But he was absolutely right because not only couldn't he use it, but also he explained why. A lot of people miss out because they're thinking of great shots and they lose sight of the story. And the story is a symphony that builds up to a certain thing, and this is not the place to put this absolutely sensational sequence. I was concentrating on my storyboard, which was going to be the best damn storyboard that you ever saw, except you couldn't use it there."

Harold Michelson
illustrator: *High Anxiety, The Birds, The Graduate*

5.



6.

"I hate the idea of going onto a location or a set someplace and [saying] 'Well, let's see, I wonder where we should put the camera?' I want to be able to say, 'The camera's going to go here, she's going to walk in the door there, and we're going to dolly with her, move in, go over there, and end up with a two-shot of her standing at the desk.' "

Robert Wise

West Side Story 1961
director: Robert Wise
production design: Boris Levin

Editorial Boards: The Focus of this Book

These different techniques all have their place in preproduction, but it is beyond the scope of this book to cover all of them in depth. Certainly, the skills outlined in the following chapters can be applied to any of these endeavors, but this volume will focus on the various aspects of editorial storyboarding for film and television and the relationship storyboards have to the broader process of production.

Why focus on one application? Because the editorial storyboard is the document that is most engaged with the story arc of the script. The intended audience for this information is a mixed group, made up of both filmmakers who may have limited drawing skills and artists who have a limited knowledge of film production. The editorial board, with its heavy emphasis on camera placement and character blocking as well as the sequence of shots telling the story, gives both the director and the designer a wide margin for input and collaboration.

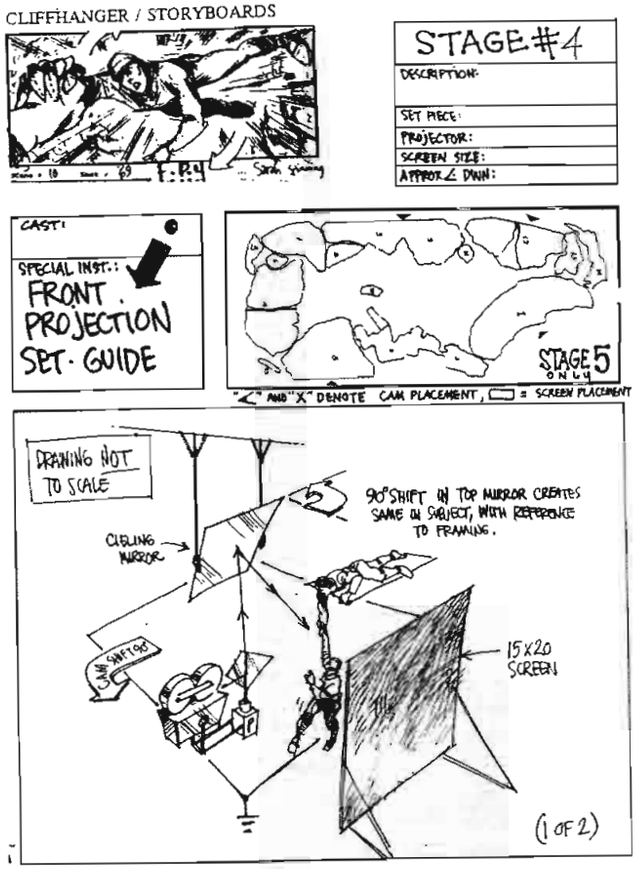
What to Storyboard? Prioritzing the Scenes

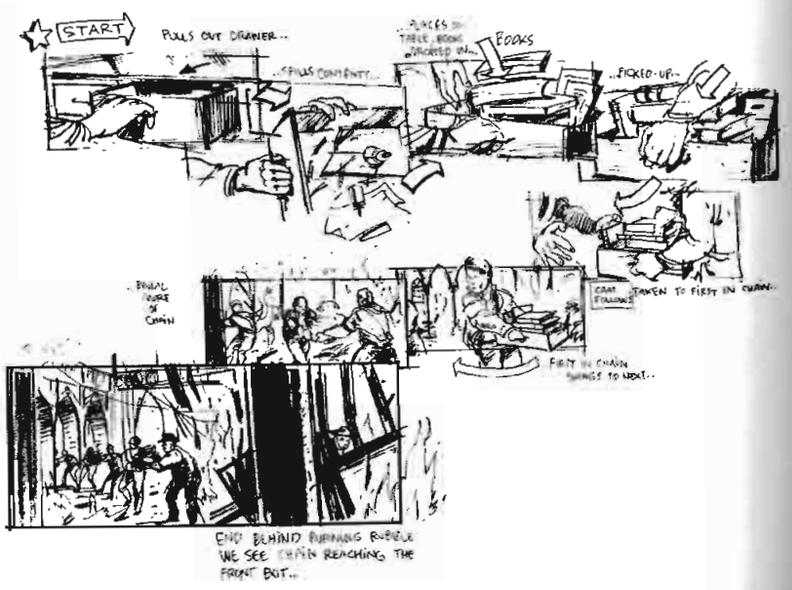
When you are preparing a script for a feature film there are situations when you have less than enough time to storyboard the entire script. You may have a modest budget that will allow you to work with a professional illustrator for only two weeks. That kind of time frame lets you visualize a few major scenes, but not much more than that. You need to prioritize the scenes to ensure that the most demanding of them will be worked out within the time and space your particular circumstance allows.

The paragraphs below cover the types of scenes that are most often storyboarded in preparation for the shoot. Some productions have the time and money to treat each scene to a thorough visualization. If you are working on a science fiction film, an action series, or a screen translation of a comic book, you may find that you have the time and budget to work on a complete visual script.

The list below is for those projects that need to concentrate their resources and storyboard a select group of scenes.

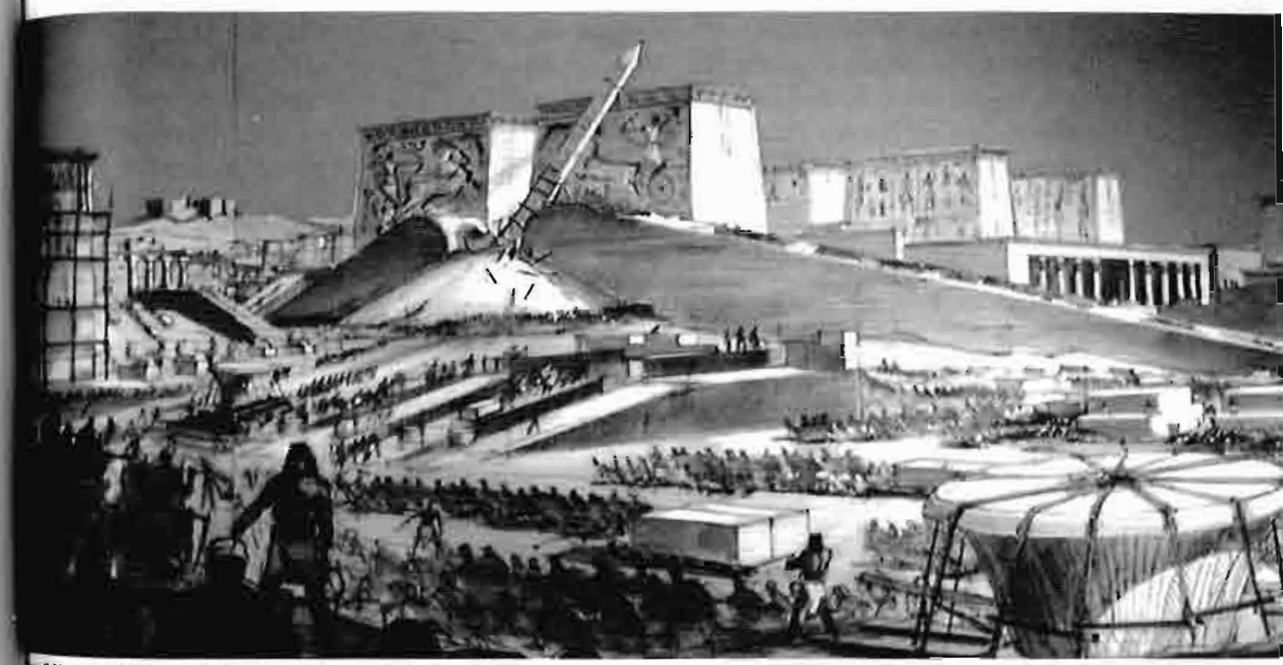
- **Special effects shots (a.k.a. FX or EFX)**
- **Stunts and pyrotechnics**
- **Crowd scenes**
- **Action**
- **Complex camera movements**
- **Montage sequences**
- **Opening and closing scenes**





Cliffhanger 1993
director: Renny Harlin
drawings: John Mann

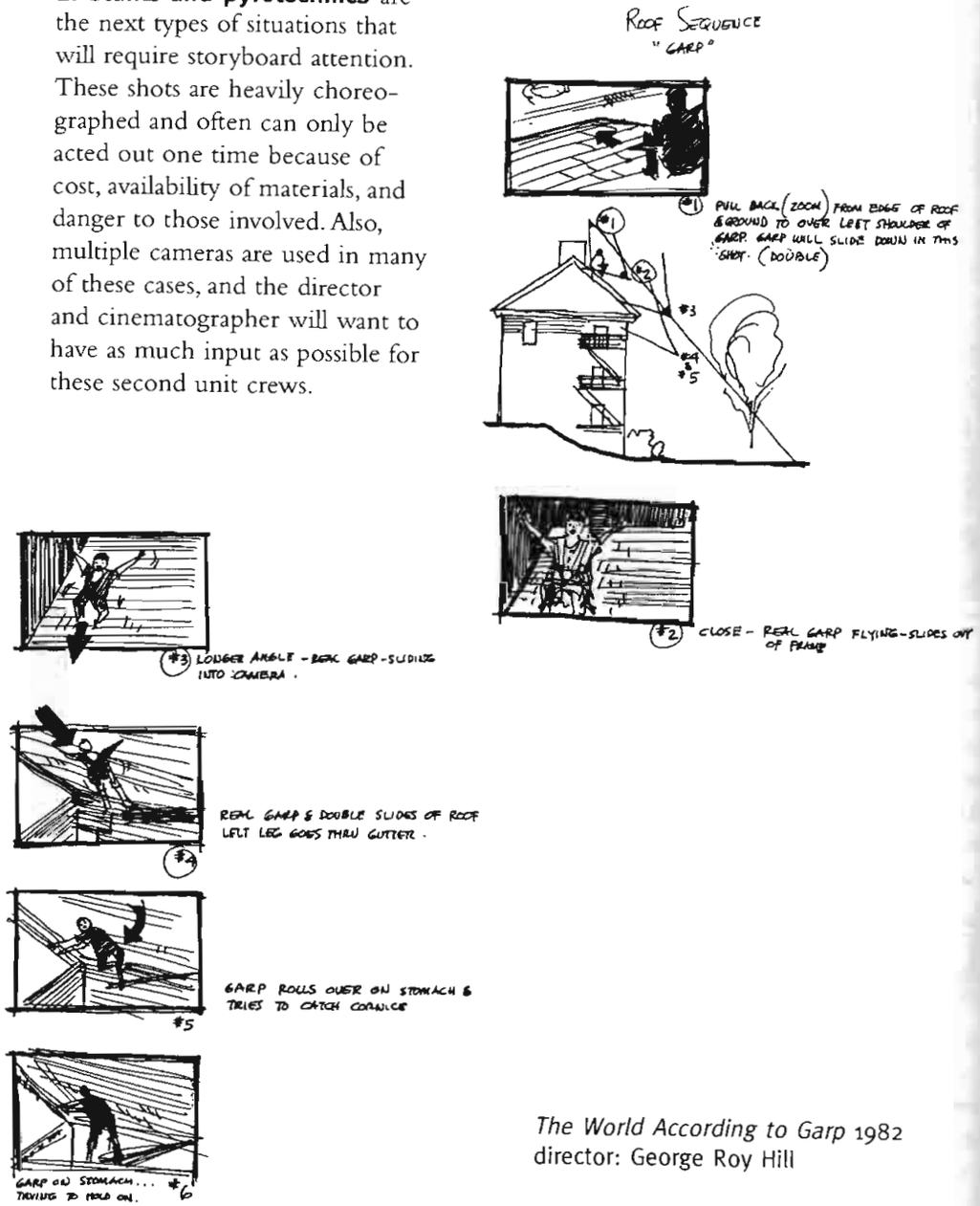
1. Special effects or FX shots are virtually always storyboarded. Most production companies do not have the internal resources to create FX shots in-house. That means that in each circumstance the work will have to be contracted out to an effects house. In order for the company to understand the production's needs, some visualization should accompany the script pages with the request for a bid on the job.



Ten Commandments 1956
director: Cecil B. DeMille
drawing: Harold Michelson

Many special effects houses have their own artists who work on visualization of the shots in question. They can work in the traditional mediums of pencil, charcoal, or marker on paper, or use advanced computer software that allows the shot to be realized in the "three dimensions" of a virtual world. Either way, the conversation between the production company, the director, and the effects group will take place as much in the visual sphere of communication as in the verbal one.

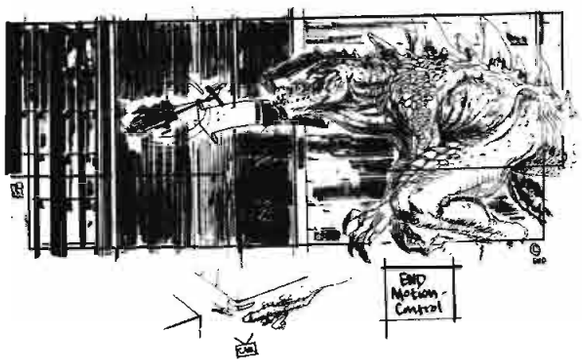
2. Stunts and pyrotechnics are the next types of situations that will require storyboard attention. These shots are heavily choreographed and often can only be acted out one time because of cost, availability of materials, and danger to those involved. Also, multiple cameras are used in many of these cases, and the director and cinematographer will want to have as much input as possible for these second unit crews.

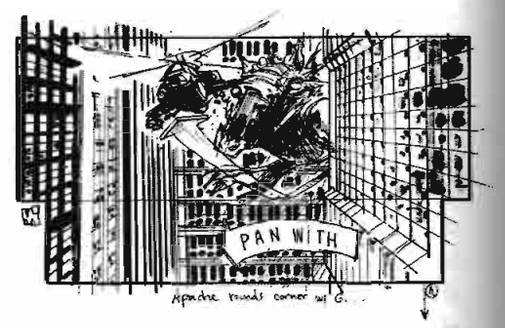


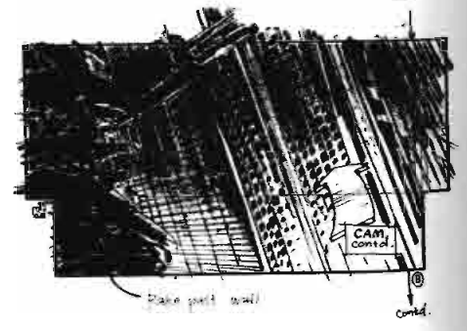
The World According to Garp 1982
director: George Roy Hill

3. Crowd scenes are a good bet for the production that has a limited storyboarding budget. A crowd can consist of 20 or 2,000 people. At either extreme it is often useful to have a set of storyboards to hand out to a crew that may be more than taxed with the overload of bodies on the set. It is also another situation where multiple cameras may be utilized. If these sequences have already been boarded out, the director, assistant directors, and other crew members will have one less element to think about during a challenging day on the set.

Quo Vadis 1951
director: Mervyn LeRoy



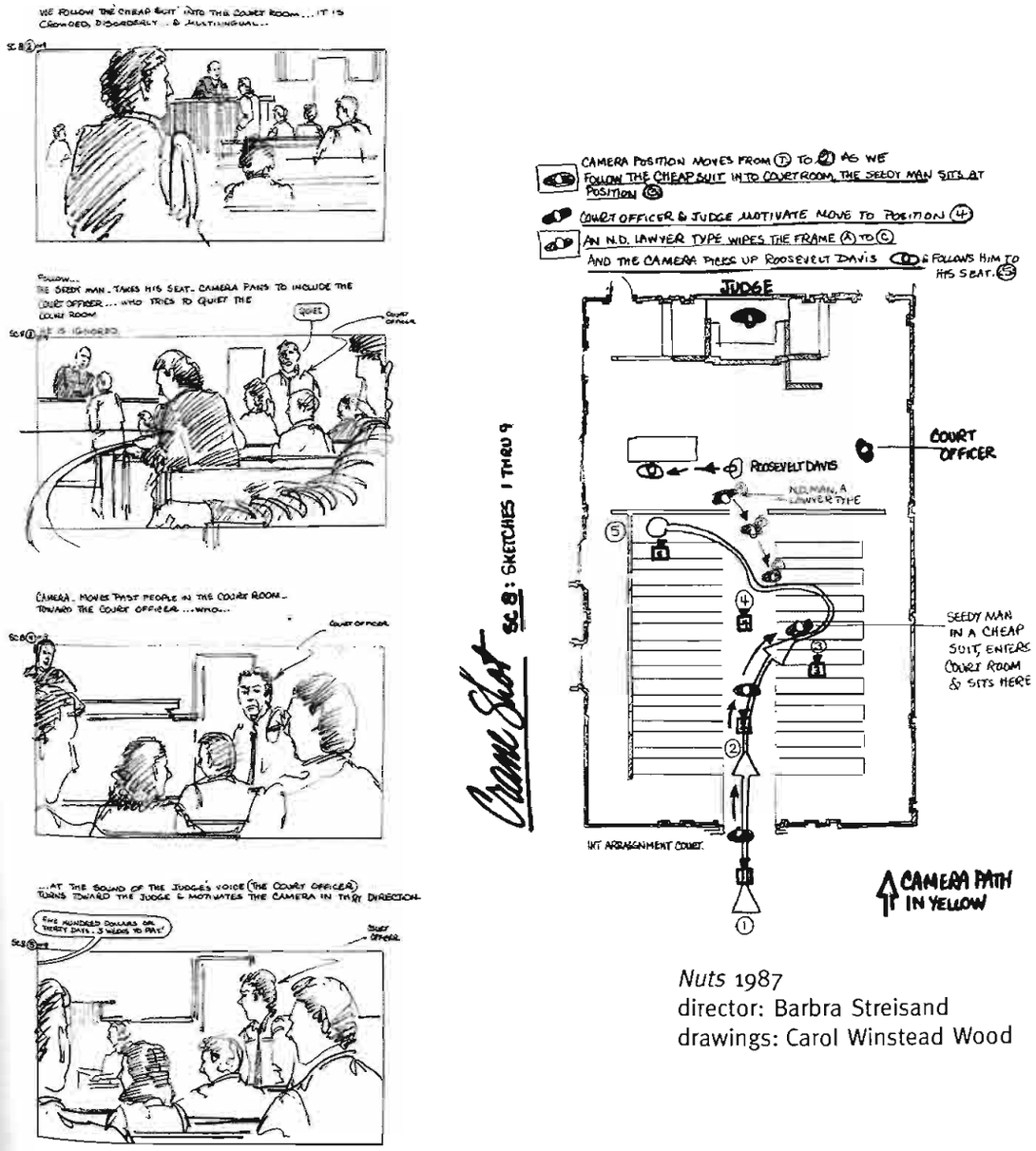




4. Action sequences, such as staged fights and car chases, lend themselves to storyboarding because they are usually highly choreographed, and therefore need to be visualized in great detail before the cameras roll. If an illustrator can be included in the rehearsals of the fight action, then the director will have a good visual record of the shot possibilities of that scene. Sometimes all that is necessary is a 35mm camera with a zoom or a video camera to block out the camera positions. That visual information can then be worked with to create a plan of action for photographing the action scene.

Godzilla 1998
director: Roland Emmerich
drawings: John Mann

5. Complex camera movement is another type of shot that lends itself to storyboarding. In the case of extended crane moves, handheld, or steadicam shots, the use of overhead diagrams tied in with sketches of frame compositions can cut down rehearsal time drastically. Or they can serve as a starting point for discussions about the shot. Either way, these visual tools encourage conversation and expedite communication.

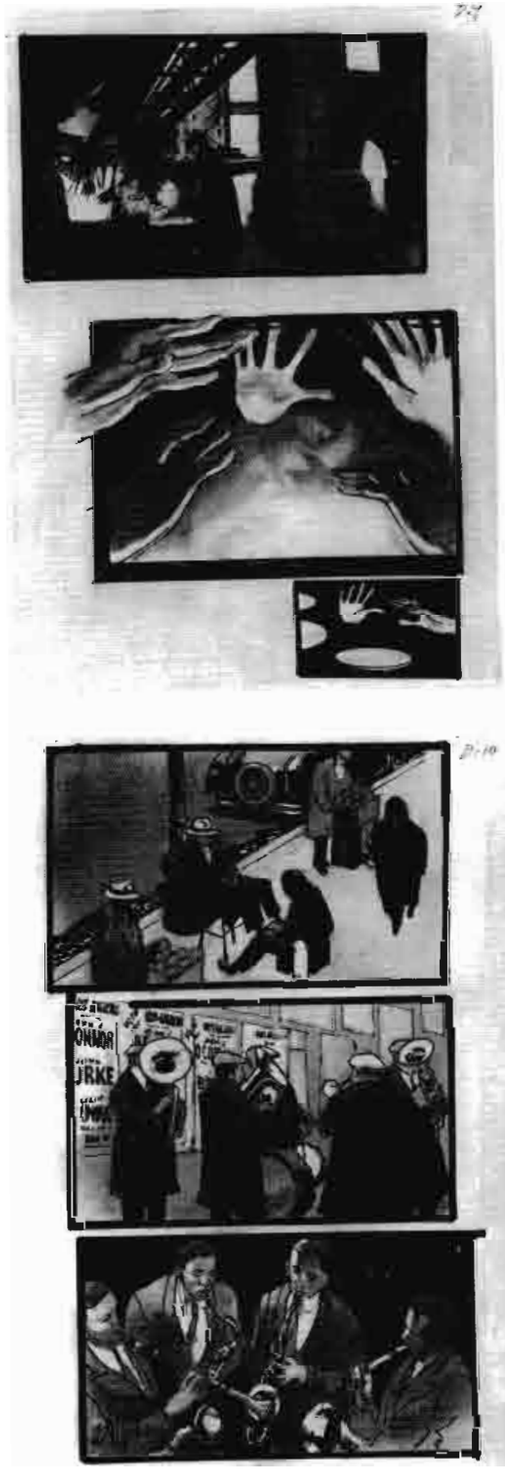


Nuts 1987
director: Barbra Streisand
drawings: Carol Winstead Wood

6. Montage sequences have a specialized meaning in American filmmaking. The word montage was originally used by European filmmakers to mean editing in general. In the United States we have narrowed the term to apply to sequences that are edited with highly compressed time and space and usually have no dialogue. A popular example of this can be found in the shopping sequence in *Pretty Woman*, when Julia Roberts's character goes on a whirlwind tour of the best stores in Los Angeles, backed up by an instrumental rendition of the title song. An all-day expedition is related in a three-minute collage of images that edits six hours into three minutes of screen time.

Montage sequences often appear in the written script as no more than a sentence or two that instructs the director to describe a passage of time using a whirlwind of images and little or no dialogue.

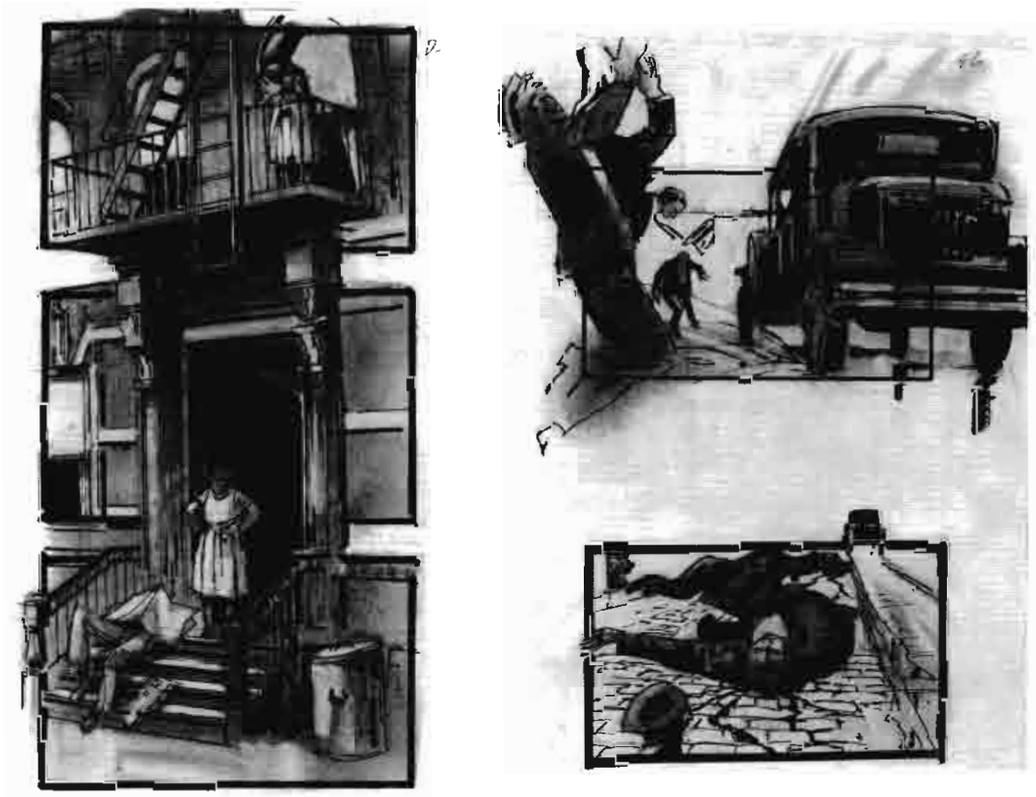
The director and crew must flesh out this shot-heavy sequence visually; the storyboards, shot list, and overhead diagrams are both individually and collectively strong starting points for conversations of this type.

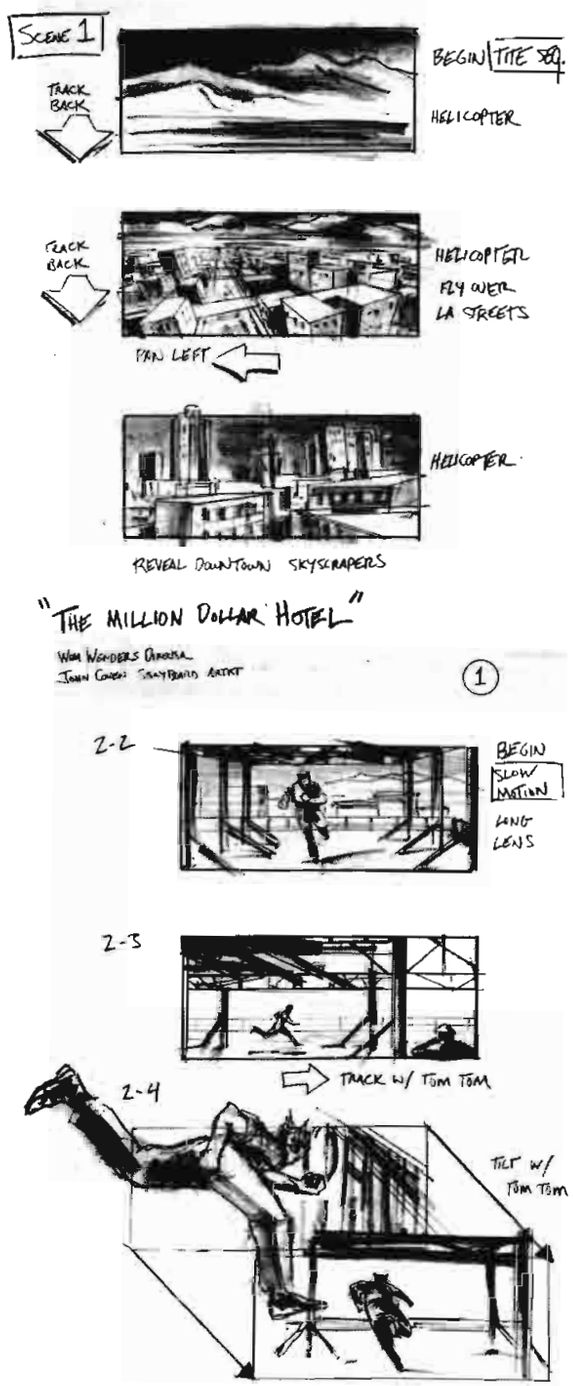


The Cotton Club 1984
director: Francis Coppola
drawings: Harold Michelson

7. Opening and closing sequences can also benefit from the treatment of preproduction visualization. Whether you are working on a feature-length film or a 20-minute industrial, the opening shots of a film strive to pull the audience into its particular world. The style of the film's imagery as well as the feel of its characters can be projected in those first few moments. A clear image of the shots that will make up this sequence can set the tone for the way the entire film is visualized. The same idea can apply to the closing scene of the film. If not a climactic moment, it is a denouement to the full three-act structure, and the imagery of these last moments will stay with the audience long after they leave the theater or turn off their televisions.

8. The Rest. There are no definite rights or wrongs here. This list is meant as a guide to get you started on the scenes that have the most pressing logistic need for the work. In terms of aesthetic needs, anything and everything or nothing at all can be planned in advance. The choice simply has to do with the style and the content of your individual project.





1. 2.

Storyboard by John Coven © 1998 Road Movies GMBH

Case Study

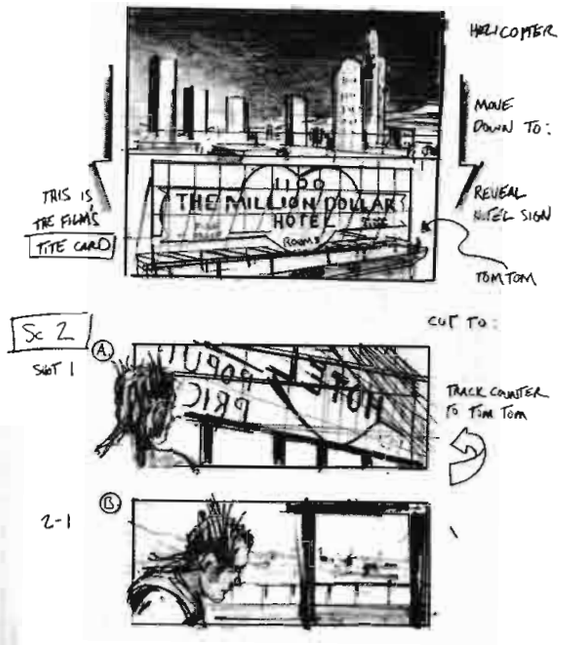
The Million Dollar Hotel

"The challenge of storyboarding is representing four dimensions in two. You are representing height, width, and depth on a piece of paper that only has height and width. The dimension that you have in film that you don't have in illustration is time. That is the fourth dimension. The art of storyboarding is in choosing the right moment of time for illustration. You have one frame and you must be able to take one frozen moment from that entire shot and represent it in one or two frames. You need to be able to communicate the entire shot in that one image.

"Each shot gives the audience one piece of information. The question for me as an illustrator is how I communicate that small portion of time through a single image. My background as a children's book Illustrator has helped me concentrate on this aspect of storyboarding."

John Coven
illustrator: *X-Men, The Usual Suspects*

The Million Dollar Hotel 2001
director: Wim Wenders
drawings: John Coven



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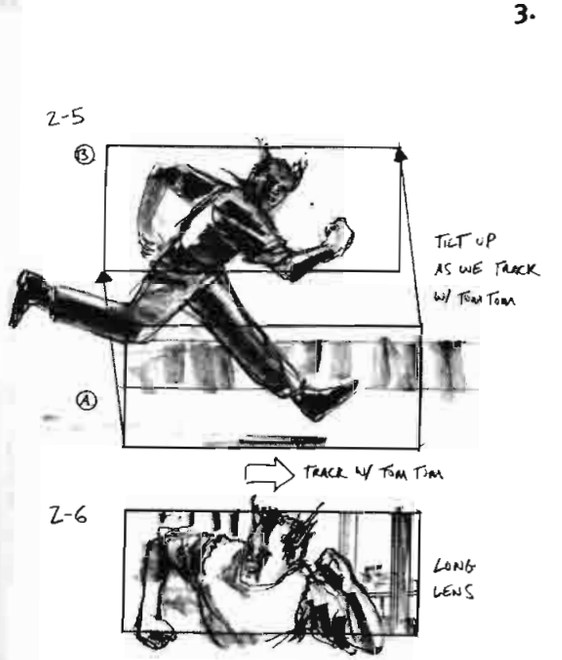

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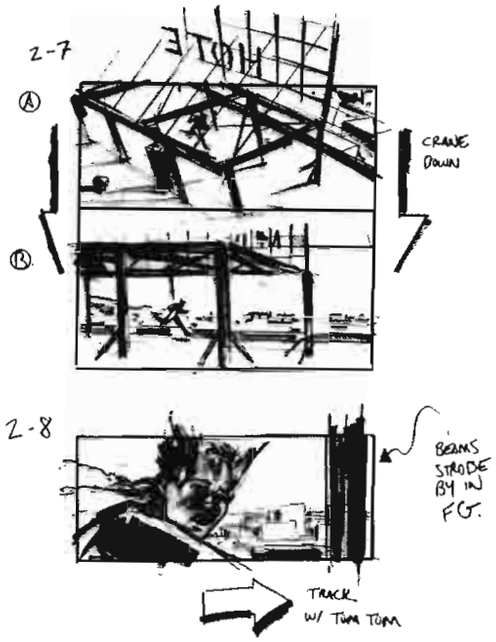

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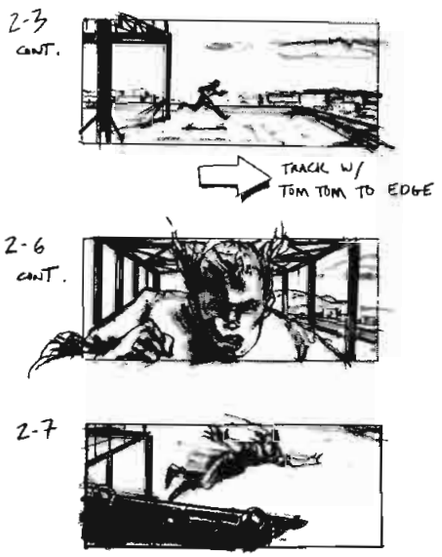


6.

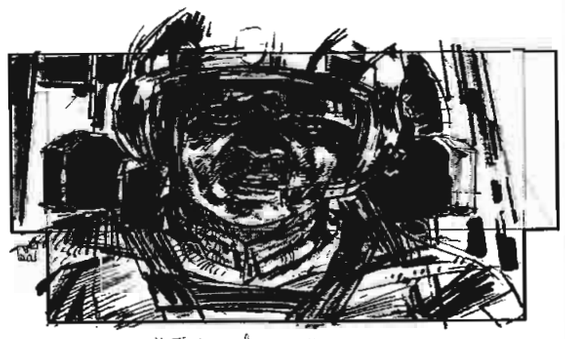
Case Study

Godzilla

"I usually start working in pre-production about two to three months before photography. The larger sized pictures, a hundred million and up, are often very effects driven. They need to board many, many shots in order to get the picture made. So the big pictures will storyboard three-quarters or more of the film. The smaller film might only board a quarter of the movie, the action sequences and so on.

Sometimes you need to create this 'Rube Goldberg' of a storyboard page. It becomes a machine that you are drawing out, a dynamic operation and that takes a lot of time. On a film like Godzilla they expected between 10 to 20 frames a day. And that was with a high degree of polish. I've done other projects where I might whip out up to sixty drawings in a single day and night. But I told the director that they were not going to be pretty drawings."

John Mann
illustrator: *Godzilla*



"...we go through everything scene by scene. I'm really meticulous about this. It's a part of choices that you make in terms of composition, lighting, and staging. What I like to do is talk about the big picture. I write these incredibly long memos about the full vision of the film. It gives the visual department a step-by-step idea of where the character starts, what's the point of view, how that point of view evolves, and what the conclusion is in the end. When a prop guy asks, 'What kind of drinking glass should I get - one with Miss Piggy on it, or should I get the Pyrex kind?' he has been let in on the bigger picture of the film so that we can make the choice in a way that is more realistic."

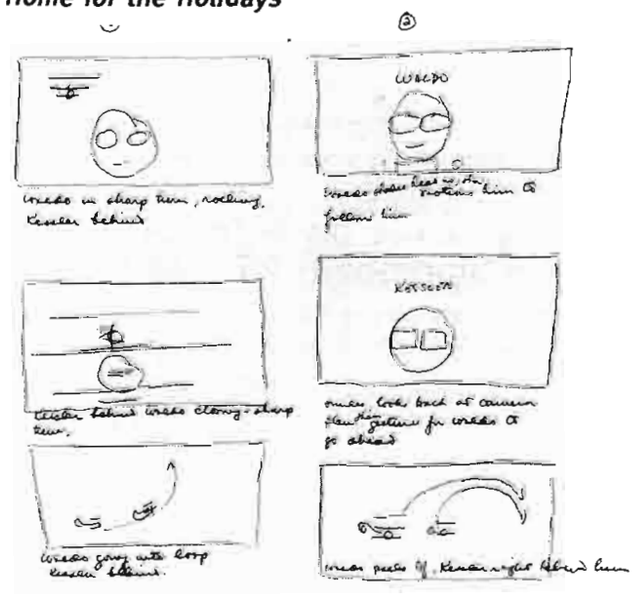
Jodi Foster
director: *Little Man Tate, Home for the Holidays*

The Storyboarding Meeting: Who Is Involved?

How many artists does it take to concoct a board? The answer is as individual as each director's taste. Some directors, such as Martin Scorsese and Werner Fassbinder, prefer to work on their own, sketching small images to be used as personal notes during production. Others draw up rough sketches themselves and then hand the drawings over to a skilled illustrator to polish them up before distributing them to the crew. George Roy Hill worked in this way on *The World According to Garp* and *The Great Waldo Pepper.*

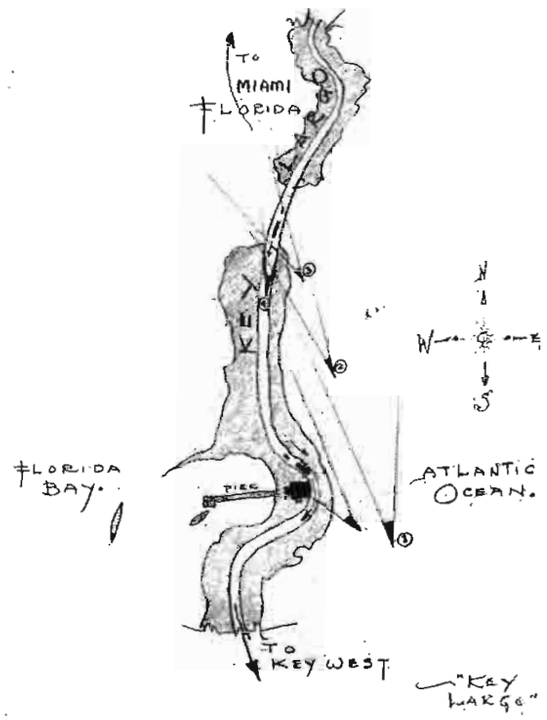
Still others like to use their designers or illustrators as visual assistants and work out the shot list and camera positions with them. Then, artists take these notes and translate them into storyboards based on these conversations. And some directors will hand over scenes without much input at all and allow the collaborator to visualize the sequence. Once the storyboard is finished, the director will edit the images and perhaps ask for revisions.

I have worked with directors at both ends of the "input spectrum," from those who stood over my shoulder expressly manipulating the angle and composition of each shot to those who handed over a script and told me to come back in a few days with a few scenes boarded out. The majority fall somewhere between the extremes, feeling comfortable with giving suggestions, but not feeling that they had to control the entire enterprise.



The Great Waldo Pepper 1975
director: George Roy Hill
drawings: George Roy Hill

If I were given a choice, I would like a director to bring an overhead diagram to our storyboard meeting. The diagram includes both abstract and concrete information and is extremely useful to someone trying to visualize the composition of each shot on the list. Some directors will bring in an overhead diagram with actors' movements already worked out. Sometimes there is the time, money, and inclination to rehearse extensively before principal photography. Other times the storyboarding process itself is the extent of the preproduction work on some scenes.



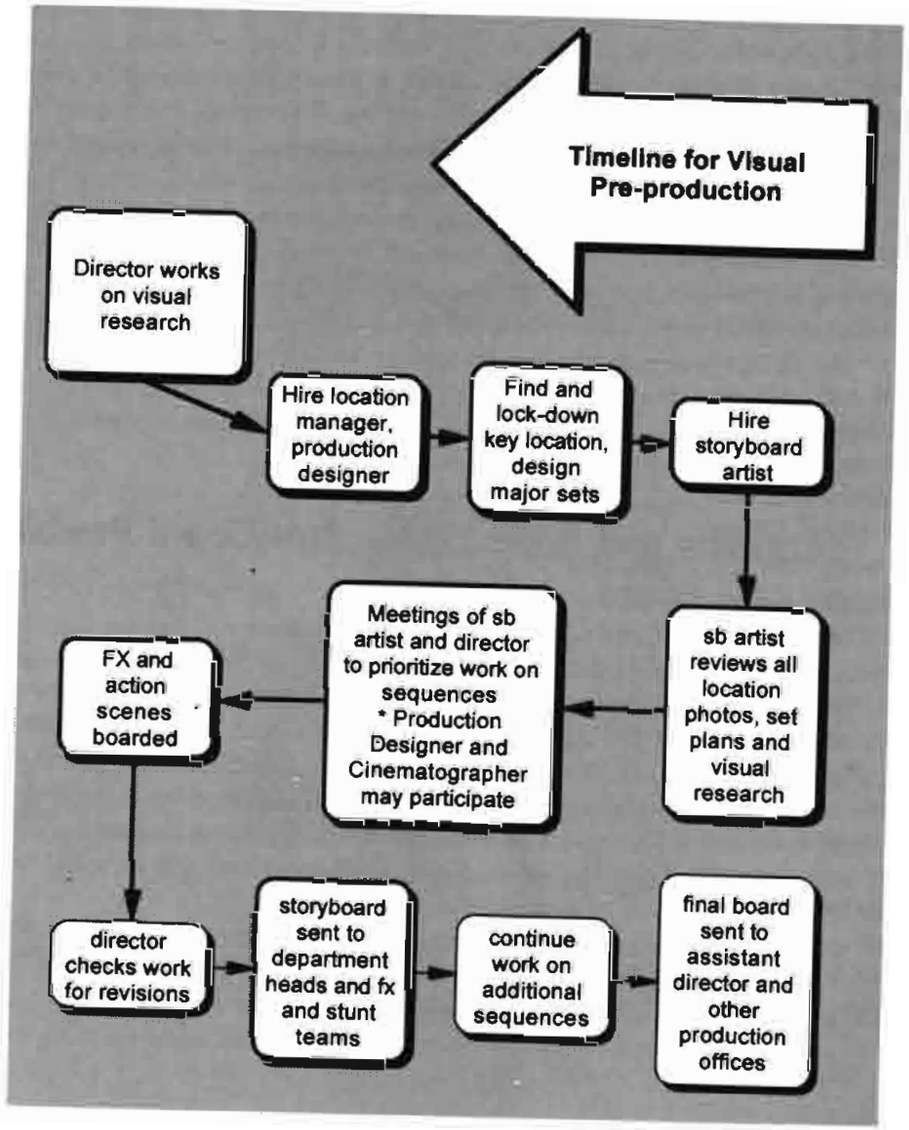
Key Largo 1948

If a director comes to a meeting with one of the three visualization documents already developed, the visual assistant will then help to expand that work into a more complete document for the crew. I have gotten up with directors and acted out the scenes with them as we blocked the characters. I have had discussions about motivation of camera moves and the logistics of moving around small locations. The storyboard artist needs to be knowledgeable in editing and composition as well as illustration. The needs of the director vary enormously from project to project, and only by being fluent in the many facets of filmmaking will a visual assistant be able to effectively communicate in the necessary language of the moment

When and Where to Begin the Storyboard Process

The attitude toward this aspect of the process varies from director to director. Some find that drawing and diagramming very early in the process helps them to begin solidifying their ideas about the film. Others prefer to wait until the locations have been locked down and the sets designed before they begin this type of planning.

Visualization Timeline Chart



Use of Research Materials

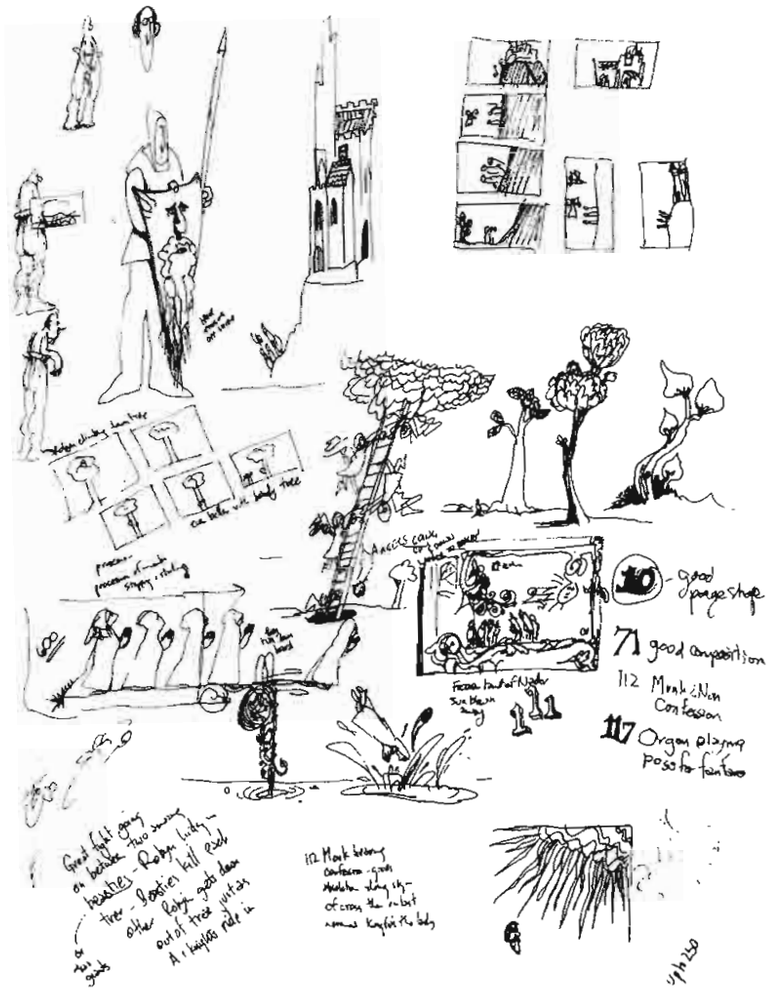
When working in collaboration it is important for a director to share his or her visual sources with whoever is brought into the process. Clips from films, magazine pages, and books on art and photography all aid in the communication of a general style or individual shots. If there is time, watch films together and discuss the influence of different sequences, camera angles, and lighting schemes in terms of the project at hand. Often this topic is only discussed between the cinematographer and the director, but opening up the discussion to include the illustrator and the other visual collaborators can allow the crew to be more aligned with the director's vision.

Once the style is developed and understood by all involved, the director can sit down alone or with a partner and begin to clarify ideas in specific images, shot lists, and overhead diagrams. Some people choose to work from images into words, others start with the shot list, then look at an overhead of the set and then place the camera in the positions it needs to occupy in order to cover the action. Other directors start with the overhead diagram, block out the actors' movements first, and then place the camera in position to watch the scene play out.

Locations and Sets: Timing Storyboard Process to Real Space

There are times when the production schedule is so rushed that the process of preparing the visual documents is left to the last two weeks or even the last few days of preproduction. This scenario is not terrific for anyone involved. The director is usually overwhelmed by other demands of the production. Location scouting for new sets, actor rehearsals, meetings with the cinematographer, even last-minute casting decisions demand the director's time. This means that end-run decision making is often done by the supporting staff (i.e., the assistant) and then looked over and approved or changed by the director on the fly.

Now, some people work best under pressure, but my suggestion is that if you have some of the locations identified and a few sets designed early in the process (say, one to two months before shooting), then waste no time and get to the task. Aesthetic decisions made in a calm state of mind are likely to be



Director's drawing
Monty Python and the Holy Grail
1974

"I can't not draw stuff and I can't not say it should be done this way. But it's a collaborative thing. I have very specific ideas and either I draw them or I drag in references and say 'I want you to look at this.' But, if you get good people, they can interpret this and make it work.... I like working with good people because if I come up with an idea, they come up with a better idea, then I come up with an even better one, and so on: it's a leapfrog process, and the work becomes much better than it would be if only I did exactly what I want."

Terry Gilliam
Gilliam on Gilliam
1999

more true to your artistic sensibility than those made in the heat of pressure. And even if this isn't true for your style of creativity, you can always change your mind about the storyboard as you get closer to the shooting day. It is good to know that you have at least one draft of the visual script available.

Altered location photographs
Ben Hur 1959
director: William Wyler
art director: Ed Carfagno

Destination: Tokyo 1943
director: Delmar Daves

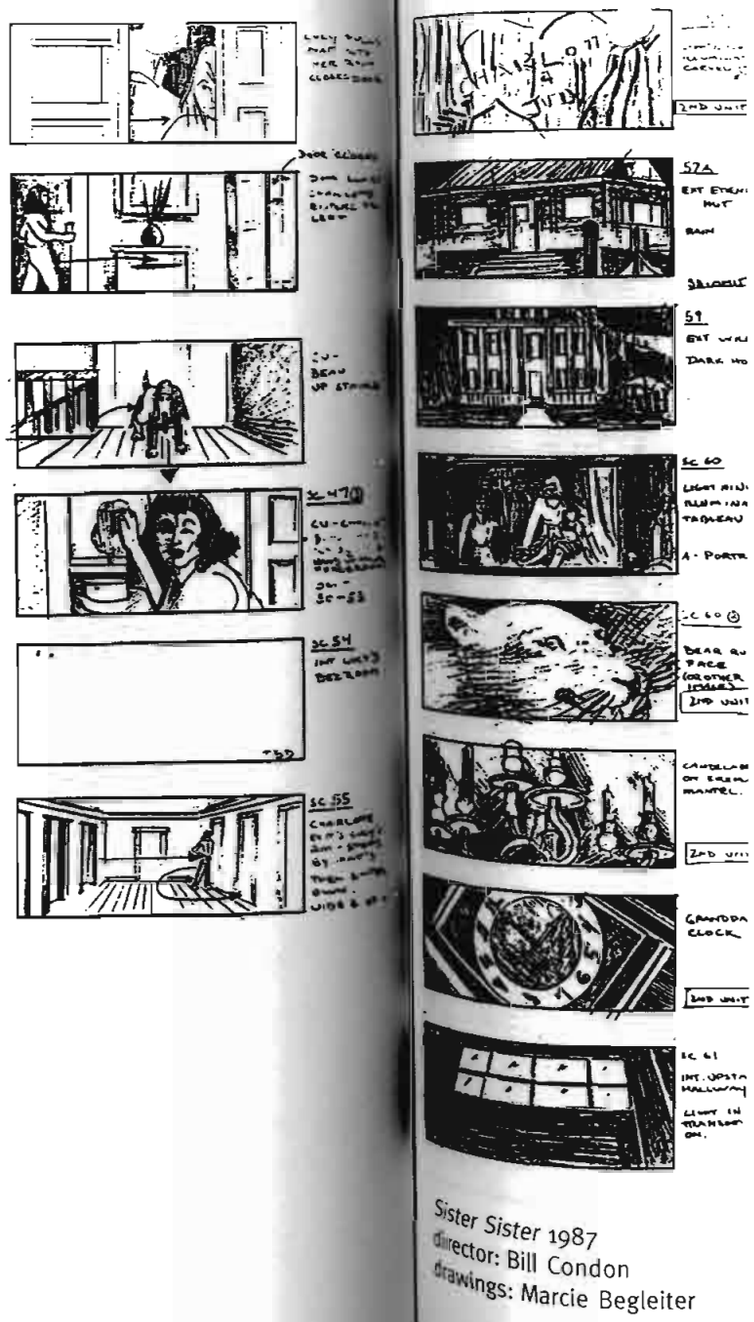
Working On Location

- Tools: digital still or video camera
- Floor plans drawn to scale and reduced for easy in-script use
- Sketch artist to create visual record of rehearsals

As an artist and visual collaborator, I enjoy coming onto a production early enough to spend time with the director and begin to understand his or her style and conceptual approach to the script. That way, any design ideas that I incorporate into the storyboards are more likely to be well-matched to the film's overall design.

Case Study

Sister, Sister



Sister Sister 1987
director: Bill Condon
drawings: Marcie Begleiter

In 1985 I worked with a writer who was preparing to shoot his first feature as director. The producer on this film was an experienced hand who realized that the more input the young director received in terms of story visualization, the better off the production would be when it came to shooting and editing the footage. I was hired on two months before principal photography was to begin. We spent the first week in a screening room viewing films that had influenced the director regarding the style of the project. The script was of the gothic-suspense genre and took place in the sweltering backwoods of Louisiana.

We immersed ourselves in the work of Hitchcock, Robert Aldrich, and Fritz Lang, not to mention books on photography and painting that related to the setting and period of the story. I began to draw the first scene: a lyrical, dreamlike montage of images. The director and producer approved these first efforts and within two weeks we were on our way down to Louisiana to finish the bulk of preproduction on location.

There were four of us in the team; the director, the cinematographer, the production designer, and myself, the storyboard artist. We walked through every location and talked through the scenes shot by shot. I kept notes, took photographs, and participated in the discussions that ranged from general ideas about the color scheme to specific decisions regarding the placement of the camera. By the end of three weeks we had completed the essential scene work, and I continued to draw up the storyboard images that were the visual notes of these meetings. By the time the crew arrived and started preparing for the shoot, we had the majority of the script worked out in a shot list and storyboard frames.

The producer and the director then made an unusual and very interesting request. I was asked to take the storyboards and reduce all the images on an office Xerox machine so that they could be handed out in a condensed form. I had been working on the scenes in editorial order, but the production wanted to hand out copies of the boards to the heads of all the crews, and requested the images in shooting order, with the shots for a day's work on a single sheet.

This handout elicited unexpected comments from my coworkers. The sound technician thanked me for the information. He said it let him plan ahead for what would be required. "Now I've got an idea of which boom to carry into the swamp tonight," he said with grateful amusement. It was a hard shoot, with lots of night work and a fairly unforgiving schedule. I was around for the first two weeks of shooting—one of the characters in the film was a painter and I had been hired to create a series of canvases for her character—and was delighted to see the director walk onto the set each day with the storyboard sheet sticking out of his back pocket.

Months later when I went to see the completed film at the cast and crew screening, I was amazed to find that watching the movie was like seeing the storyboard come to life. There was approximately an 80-90% correlation between the boards and the film as it was shot and edited. To this day I feel that this was one of the high points in my experiences as a film collaborator. And I credit the experience to the producer, who had the foresight to spend a little extra up-front so that the work of visualizing the film was a priority. The storyboard in that production was a document that came out of a true collaboration of the director, designers, cinematographer, and illustrator.

"I never make storyboards, designs. In fact, I write out my own scenes and then, in the moment of shooting, I really do the opposite of what I have written, generally speaking."

Bernardo Bertoluccim,
Directing the Film

Ten Commandments 1956
director: Cecil B. DeMille
drawings: Harold Michelson

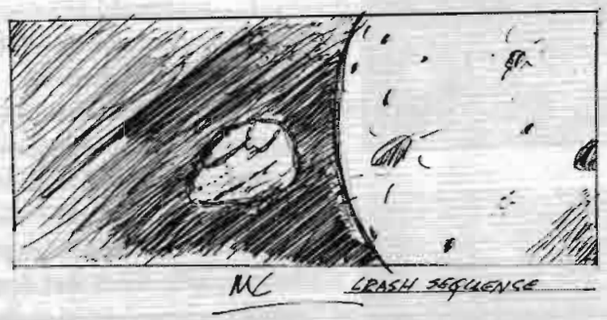
From The General to the Specific

The information in this chapter has been intended as a general guide to the process of preproduction visualization. The chapters that follow will cover the specifics of creating the storyboard, the shot list, and the overhead diagram. The information needed to create them will be explained in detail and exercises will be offered to focus and develop your visual communication skills.

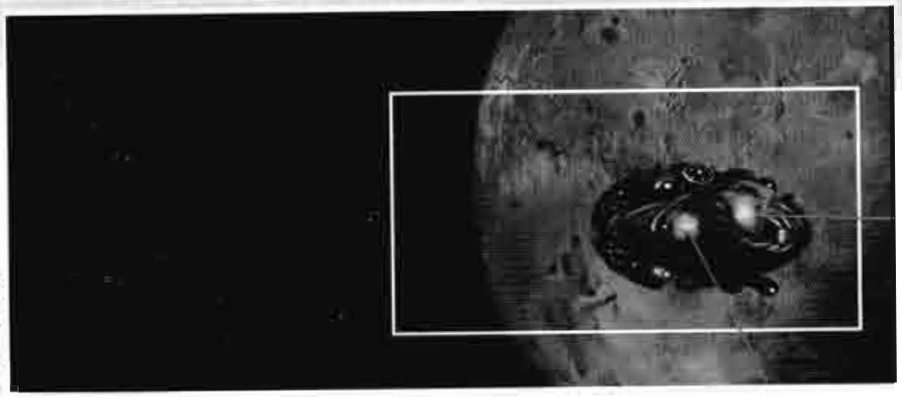
Points to remember:

- Prioritize your scenes
- Decide on the crew members to be involved with the pre-viz
- Start well ahead of shooting schedule
- Work off of location overheads and floor plans of the set whenever possible
- Determine who will receive the boards and distribute

The Fifth Element
Effects Drawings by Ron Gress



• preliminary drawing



• 3-D digital storyboard

• film frame

The Fifth Element 1997
director: Luc Besson
drawings: Ron Gress

Interview with Ron Gress

My title is Visual Effects Art Director here at Digital Domain [an efx house in Los Angeles]. I primarily develop ideas on the computer in 3-D programs like Bryce 4, Photoshop, and Poser. I also create animatics and make quick-time movies to illustrate the shots for those directors who need help visualizing what they want. So the more complete storyboard you can provide for them the better. I'll take drawings and flesh them out in 2-D and 3-D software. These are my equivalents of storyboards, but they're basically key frame illustrations. They will carry you through a live-action sequence.

At Digital Domain we are often approached by directors who bring us a script and ask us to identify which elements need digital effects, or sometimes they come to us with key frames and ask us to flesh them out. It depends on how active the production designer and the director are together on planning the digital effects. Many directors lack experience in that area and they leave it to the visual effects supervisor. The job is relatively new, it's just been used for the last few years, and the visual effects art director is even newer. I acquired that title for myself a few years ago when I was brought onto *The Fifth Element*.

On a picture like that there might be five key people working on a single sequence. One working on the camera move, someone else working on the models, another working on the lighting, and another on the 2D and 3-D elements. Then we have a leader who oversees everyone and acts as an administrator. The hierarchy might look like this: the Visual Effects Supervisor over the Digital Effects Supervisor and then the Art Directors reporting to them, just like any other film crew. Then there is — on top of all that — the executive producer, who has the final say.

Sometimes the director might like to talk to me rather than filter the information through someone else. Once I've done the still frames or an animatic I'll take it to the Visual Effects Supervisor who will give me feedback, and then the material goes to the artists again, version through version. Sometimes there might be 50 or 60 iterations of a visual effect before it finally gets approved by the director in the screening room.

From Word to Image

by
Marcie Begleiter

Storyboarding
and the
Filmmaking
Process

Published by Michael Wiese Productions
11288 Ventura Blvd.
Suite 621
Studio City, CA 91604

818. 379.8799
Fax: 818. 986.3408
mw@mwp.com
www.mwp.com

Printed and Manufactured
in the United Startes of America

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Begleiter, Marcie.
From Word To Image: storyboarding and the filmmaking process/
Marcie Begleiter.
p.cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-941188-28-0
1. Storyboards. 2. Commercial art Technique. I. Title.

NC1002S85 B44 200
741.6--dc21

Cover Design: Art Hotel, Los Angeles
Back Cover Photo: Susan Sheriden
Interior Layout: William Morosi
Printed by: Sheridan Books, Inc.

Table of Contents